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JOHN GALSWORTHY

BY LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX

IN *The Dark Flower* John Galsworthy tells an incident of a mother who took her nine-year-old boy out to see the sunset. She pointed to it, and said: "That is beauty, Jack; do you *feel* it?" One cannot but believe that this happened to the author himself, and that such an incident, coupled with a valuable inheritance, may have helped to lay the foundation of his extraordinary penetration into the beautiful,—in life, in nature, in humanity, and in morals.

Moreover, it took the three most beautiful shires in England to produce this author. He was born at Coombe in Surrey. His father's people have been in Devon since the flood—"of Saxons, at all events," John Galsworthy says; and his mother came from a family named Bartlett, which has been for centuries in Worcestershire.

The part of Devon in which Galsworthy lives is not to be confused with the gentler scenery of Devon. In Dartmoor the landscape is Alpine rather than rural, arid rather than "bowery." Frosts are common as late as April and May, and occur occasionally in June, and there is a fine mountainous splendor of outlook. The little moor Gaulzery, whence the author's people derive, may still be visited, and it is commemorated thus in one of Galsworthy's poems:

Gorse and heather, heather and grass,
Up to the curve of the Autumn sky.
Purple are all the darkening tors
That crown the soft-retreating day;
The far-blown woodsmoke steals its way
From stars of fire in the cottage doors;
And the Southwest wind, with her reedy tune
Sings in the pines her wild, soft praise;
There hangs a golden, mocking moon
At the western cornerways!

John Galsworthy was subjected to the conventional English training of his class: five years at Harrow, where he did eminently well in studies and games, just missing the head-prefectship of the school, and making a name for himself in football, running, and gymnasium; then followed two years at New College, Oxford, where, as a close connection of his says, "Can you believe it?—he was lazy, dressy, sporting"; which doubtless gave him insight into the conventional British feeling of caste. Despite that two years' record, there was strength to fall back on, for in his third year at Oxford he took an Honors degree in Law, and was called to the bar in 1890. Instead of practising (since he hated all the details of his profession) he took several years for travel, visiting Canada, British Columbia, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, the Fiji Islands, South Africa, and later traversed a good part of Europe, the United States, and Egypt. Neither in his own life nor in that of his parents was there any need for strain after material things. Apparently, the grandparents attended to that once and for all; and thence there is a moral to derive. It is difficult—though, of course, possible, with two such instances in mind as Keats and Francis Thompson—to believe that an artist can stand the sordid strain of earning a living and at the same time be steeped in beauty. But it is greatly to the world's advantage that Shelley, Swinburne, and Galsworthy were not required to waste time upon money-getting.

The strange and interesting fact in the case is that in none of these great geniuses did comfort kill pity. Galsworthy from the beginning has been aware that men, "like children whose mother has departed from their home, were slowly being forced to trust in and be good to themselves and one another, and so to form out of their necessity, desperately, unconsciously, their new great belief in humanity."

He did not begin to write until 1897, when he was thirty years old. Since then he has published eight novels, ten plays, and four volumes of essays. Joseph Conrad told me an interesting tale of commanding a sailing ship between Adelaide and the Cape. On his ship were two young college men who perpetually talked of books and of authorship. Finally Conrad, who listened intently, confessed that he had with him the manuscript of a story he was trying to write. The younger men were interested, and finally held in their hands one half of the manuscript of *Almayer's Folly*. Such

was the encouragement they gave the Polish captain that from that time on the most brilliant living writer of descriptive English took literature as a serious profession. One of these college men who hailed Conrad was John Galsworthy. Whether the interview also influenced his own choice of a profession is not known.

I can scarcely hope that these meagre biographical details will in any way account for the greatest prose impressionist of our generation. Perhaps sometime we may have another *Child in the House* which will more fully develop just how such a soul is born and reared, so that no exquisite moment, no shade of loveliness in light and colour that visits the day or the night, may pass without making its impress.

Certain it is that who would write of John Galsworthy must understand a soul fairly steeped in beauty; a heart touched by the infinite pathos of human life. These two qualities appear, at times, consorted with the strength of a Zola, with the brilliancy and delicacy of a Meredith, and again with all the moral indignation of a Shelley. He feels as deeply as Swinburne, but he has the restraint of Pater, without a touch of Pater's disease—hopelessness, world-weariness, and lack of faith in the progress and perfectibility of human society. If Galsworthy did not snatch at the beauty of the moment: were his spirit not constantly roused and startled "into sharp and eager observation" where "every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive," he would not be an impressionist. But he has, in addition to this, a spirit wholly divorced from the famous aesthetic eighties and the nerve-racked nineties of the last century. He has the twentieth century faith in the malleability of human life.

Picking up his volumes fairly at random one may cull exquisite mosaics of description. By an Italian sea he writes:

If the air was void of sound, it was full of scent—that delicious and enlivening perfume of mingled gum, and herb, and sweet wood being burned somewhere a long way off; and a silky, golden warmth slanted on to us through the olives and umbrella pines. Large wine-red violets were growing near. On such a cliff might Theocritus have lain, spinning his songs; on that divine sea Odysseus should have passed. And we felt that presently the goat-god must put his head forth from behind a rock.

Describing in "A Novelist's Allegory" the marching of Cethra with his lantern up and down the dark thoroughfare of the *Vita Publica*, he shows us dawn:

The saffron swan of dawn, slow swimming up the sky river between the high roof-banks, bent her neck down through the dark air-water to look at him staggering below her with his still smoking wick.

Had the author himself in mind when he said of Mark Lennan?—

For before all beauty he was humble, inclined to think himself a clod. It was the part of life which was always unconsciously sacred, and to be approached trembling. The more he admired, the more tremulous and diffident he became.

Is not the following passage the prose rendering of the fifth and sixth stanzas of Keats's "Nightingale"?

What a night!—whose stars were hiding in sheer, heavy warmth; whose small round golden moon had no transparency! A night like a black pansy with a little gold heart. And silent! For, of the trees, that whispered so much at night, not even the aspens had voice. The unstirring air had a dream-solidity against her cheeks. But in all the stillness, what sentiency, what passion—as in her heart!

Again Mark Lennan had come, after a long day's work from his studio, into the courtyard garden to smoke a cigarette and feel the sun on his cheek before it sank behind the wall:

A piano-organ far away was grinding out a waltz; and on an hydrangea tub, under the drawing-room window, he sat down to listen. Nothing was visible from there, save just the square patch of a quiet blue sky, and one soft plume of smoke from his own kitchen chimney; nothing audible save that tune and the never ending street murmur. Twice birds flew across—starlings. It was very peaceful, and his thoughts went floating like the smoke of his cigarette, to meet who-knew-what other thoughts—for thoughts, no doubt, had little swift lives of their own; desired, found their mates, and lightly blending sent forth offspring. Why not? All things were possible in this wonder-house of a world. Even that waltz tune, floating away, would find some melody to wed, and twine with, and produce a fresh chord that might float in turn to catch the hum of a gnat or fly, and breed again. Queer—how everything sought to entwine with something else! On one of the pinkish blooms of the hydrangea he noted a bee—of all things in this hidden away garden of tiles and gravel and plants in tubs! The little furry, lovely thing was drowsily clinging there, as if it had forgotten what it had come for

—seduced, maybe, like himself, from labour by these last rays of the sun. Its wings, close-furled, were glistening; its eyes seemed closed. And the piano-organ played on, a tune of yearning, waiting, yearning . . .

There is a touch of Shelley in this, and one remembers “Love’s Philosophy.”

If in the novels one may stumble, every few pages, upon such passages, it is chiefly in the plays that the passion for social justice comes forward. To be sure, each novel is drenched also in the pity of it all; but the plays, short, concise, models of structure, one by one, take up some form of injustice and set it before the reader. The fantasy called *The Little Dream*, with its strong Maeterlinckian flavour, stands alone, depicting the soul’s adventure with society and solitude, humanity, nature, death. *The Silver Box* leaves its discredited charwoman coping with starvation and undeserved loss of character. His play, *Justice*, so strongly depicted the traps in which a well-meaning but weak young man can be caught by the law that it literally changed the English prison system. Winston Churchill, Home Secretary at the time this play was produced, is said to have been so shaken by it that reforms were set afoot and carried through, notably a mitigation of solitary confinement. *Strife* dealt with a class war. *The Eldest Son* shows the downfall of a certain moral attitude toward woman when it touches the upper classes. *The Fugitive* follows a hunted woman who has dared to leave her husband, till she finds refuge in suicide. *The Pigeon* is the most philosophical and subtle of all the plays, for it bears the hardest doctrine of all, the doctrine of universal tolerance. “Live and let live” applied to all life is a theory difficult for this generation, so buckram-shod in its moral approvals and disapprovals. *The Mob* might lead one to suspect that Mr. Galsworthy is losing faith in the intellectual integrity of the masses. For More, the hero who stands by his own view, fighting to a finish when he knows he must lose, thus addresses the Mob as he dies:

You’ve forced your way into my house, and you’ve asked me to speak. Put up with the truth for once! You are the thing that pelts the weak; kicks women; howls down free speech. This to-day, and that to-morrow. Brain—you have none. Spirit—not the ghost of it! If you’re not meanness, there’s no such thing. If you’re not cowardice, there is no cowardice. Patriotism—there are two kinds—that of soldiers and this of mine. You have neither.

For this speech he dies, and years later has a monument erected to the memory of one "faithful to his ideal."

Galsworthy's theory of the function of fiction is clearly set forth in his "Novelist's Allegory" in the *Inn of Tranquility*. His neither to teach nor preach, but merely to hold up the lantern whereby life may be seen as it is—cesspools and rich carved frontages, sightless hovels and garden gates, rich folk revelling and poor folk sleeping in hutches. If thereby the comfortable are disturbed by alarming sights, surely it is no fault of the novelist, but of that lantern itself, "held like a handful of daffodils against the black stuffs of secrecy."

From this one might argue that Galsworthy belongs to the new school whose whole task it is to offer what is called "a slice of life"; or what Mr. Henry James designates as "saturation in the subject-matter." On the contrary, Galsworthy is not even tainted by the "incurable Democratic suspicion of the selective." He remains, with all his pity, a great artist, and therefore an artist with a quick eye for impressions and effects. Comparing him with his two famous contemporaries, Wells and Bennett, one finds in Wells a substantiality, a bulk and solidity of thought, that is absent in Galsworthy, the artist. Wells has neither tradition nor prejudice, moral or artistic. He is as adventurous as the rashest journalist. Anything is matter for realistic fiction provided it be life. Bennett cannot distinguish form from matter, and to him, as anyone can see, a lump of clay is every bit as good as the finished statue. Any outpouring of matter may be literature. But Galsworthy is enough of the old school to have in mind, from the first stroke, the beauty of the final picture. His very touch poetizes, etherializes. Even the police courts, when he leads us there, are touched with a tender sort of courtesy.

If one looked upon modern life as a great effort toward a synthesis of human purpose, one would find Wells making for a world of general material well-being—sanitation, education, scientific discovery, application of natural laws, and as much free play to the natural instincts as is compatible with personal safety. But Galsworthy would be making for suppression of the material in heightened perceptions of beauty, poetry, and spirituality.

What hurts Wells in life is stupidity—"better for a man to die of his diseases than be cured unwittingly"—and

again: "I have not strong feeling for the horrors and discomforts of poverty as such; sensibilities can be hardened to endure the life led by the Romans in Dartmoor jail a hundred years ago or softened to detect a crumpled rose-leaf; what disgusts me is the stupidity and warring purposes of which poverty is the outcome." What, on the other hand, distresses Galsworthy is that anyone should be so sodden as to miss poetic perceptions and gentle sympathies. In a certain way the two writers hold identical ideals. Wells writes: "I want to make more generally possible a relationship of communication and interchange that for want of a less battered and ambiguous word I needs must call Love." And all of Galsworthy's striving is for that insight and imaginative kindness which shall be able to live and let live, love and let love. Probably this end is the instinctive outreaching of all higher consciousness to-day, and we must learn to realize that it need not necessarily result in a dead-level of middle-class culture and an endless stretch of uniform suburban villas.

Compared with Bennett, his vigorous grasp of detail,—his patient gathering up of them, one by one, till by very numbers they make the picture,—Galsworthy is the selective artist, and above all the fine gentleman. Even in the lowest classes he finds gentlemen, courtliness, fine manners, a sense for justice, fair play, and non-interference which belongs to the aristocrat. Take such sketches as *The Portrait*, *Quality*, *Courage*, and you find in widely differing classes the same qualities of the brave independent gentleman.

His earliest novels hardly presaged his later development. In *Villa Rubein*, for example, I find nothing that I recognize as Galsworthy save a few bits of description:

In the East the mountain peaks—fingers of snow—were glittering above the mist. A grave simplicity lay upon the scene, on the roofs and spires, the valley and the dreaming hillsides with their yellow scars and purple bloom and white cascades like tails of dappled horses in the wind.

In the *Island Pharisees* he comes to his own. This novel introduces his favorite character Ferrand, who plays a part in many of the sketches and the second part in the *Pigeon*. In the former he presents a striking contrast to the perfectly well-bred English family who could never really feel sympathy or affection for those who failed to share its own class traditions. Galsworthy's genius for character drawing

comes out clearly in this novel, with its picture of the hostess at Home Oaks whose superiority had been breathed in as she lay in her cradle, and who was so sure that she and her class were the "correct thing" that it was impossible for her not to believe that the rest of the world was invented to keep them stable and in place. Mrs. Dennant's interview with the gardener who would not cease in due season to grieve for his dead wife, is a masterly bit of satiric writing—as, indeed, is his whole description of the Squire's lady.

After that the novels run in systematic order, taking up dominating sections of society. *The Man of Property*, showing the class secure in riches and ownership, depicts the business man with his keen scent for a bargain, his firm will and strong common sense, his interest in the cost of things. To my mind this is the finest novel of the first period. In plot construction, character drawing, and setting it is a finished product. Moreover, he portrays as interesting a family connection as the Dodson connection in the *Mill on the Floss*. Here, too, he dealt with that topic that constantly concerns him—"An unhappy marriage! No ill-treatment—only that indefinable malaise, that terrible blight which killed all sweetness under Heaven, and so from day to day, from night to night, from week to week, from year to year, till Death should end it." It has one flaw, the character of Irene, beautiful, passive, led from one act to another by Fate or chance, but with no definite creative personality.

The Country House, by far the most popular of the novels, deals with the Country Squire. Here is the most delightful lady that Galsworthy has yet drawn: Mrs. Pendyce, a woman of silk and steel; exquisite, capable of infinite endurance and some courage; a lovely mother, but still a mere passive creature in the hands of Destiny, one who accepts rather than makes a life. The chapter, "Sabbath at Worsted Skeynes," is a bit of descriptive writing unparalleled in its delicate veracity, its sense of proportion, its keen observation. The spaniel John, the fox terriers, the old horse put out to graze, are as real, as wonderfully penetrated, as Horace Pendyce, thinking, as he stands at the reading desk, "this lesson is well read by me"; or as Mrs. Pendyce, thinking, as she fixes her eyes on the rector, of the *point-de-venise* to be bought next spring in New Bond Street. If one sets *The Country House* a little lower than *The Man of Property* it is because there are fewer characters in it who capture our sympathies.

In writing, observation, character drawing, it is equal if not superior.

Fraternity is a subtle picture of the professional classes, and again one feels one's sympathies very slightly enlisted, except by old Mr. Stone, who is a delightful personage. Bianca is too fish-blooded to hold one's interest. Thyme is an uncertain forerunner of Nedda. Cecilia is shadowy. Hilary holds the stage chiefly, but again, the drama lies rather in the weariness of culture set against the hot passions and keen strife of the slums, than in the individuals.

With *The Patrician* we enter upon what may be noted as the opening of Galsworthy's middle period. It was foreshadowed in 1912 by the volume of essays entitled *The Inn of Tranquility*. By this time Galsworthy is complete master of his matter and method, and his style is touched by a certain heightened tone, a lyric rapture which must either be perfect or fail. In Mr. Galsworthy it is perfect. There are in *The Inn of Tranquility* some half dozen essays that are exquisite (even though one is warned that the word is truly applicable only about three times in a life-time!)—namely: "Quality," "Wind in the Rocks," "Romance," "Memories," "A Novelist's Allegory," "Vague Thoughts on Art." *The Patrician*, a study of the aristocratic class, is full of lyric writing; notably Barbara's wild drive at night with Miltoun, Courtier's meditation as he leans out into the night from his window thinking of Barbara, and the entire last chapter. I point this out as showing to what it should lead, for the *Dark Flower*, from beginning to end, is one long lyric. It is in no wise a novel. Three incidents in a man's life, passionate incidents each of them, are described with the lyric rapture by which only they may be felt. Of the three sketches the middle one, *Summer*, is the most perfect, and also the strongest. The quaint question of morality brought up in connection with the book might have been entirely done away with had not each sketch centred about the same hero; and, after all, the question is merest convention.

The Freelands, the latest novel, seems to hark back to the pre-lyric period. It circles about the great question of the land. Here, as elsewhere, Galsworthy's sympathies are with "the little company of great hearts" who face life naked of advantage. Once more the limitation is in the women characters. Kirsteen, indeed, promises to be an iron character; and yet one is never quite satisfied that Galsworthy's women

are flesh and blood,—free, creative agents. A course in the lives of Madame de Staël, Rachel Varnhagen, George Sand, Henriette de Meritens, and Marie Bashkirtseff, might give him a more vital type. His women are too traditional, too passive, too uniformly Victorian, with all the old-fashioned virtues of self-suppression, obedience to the male at hand, gentle passivity, and wondering acceptance. Their sole motive force is love. When Galsworthy finds out—as doubtless he will—that woman is as various an animal as man, we may have such women from his pen as Hardy, Meredith, and Shakespeare have given to English literature. It might almost be said that his dogs and horses have as much (of course I do not mean as *high*) individuality as his women. At the moment I can think of no great English writer who has known and written of animals as he has. The “dear dogs” in *The Country House* are incomparable, and the soft, wobbly puppy who arrived in the train from Salisbury with long nose swollen from weeping, his wild rover’s instinct and faithful heart, lives in our hearts as do few human portraits.

The last volume of essays, *The Little Man and Other Satires*, is rather a falling off after *The Inn of Tranquility*. The Zola element in John Galsworthy is active in it. It is a volume strangely lacking in that lyric rapture, that sense of beauty and poetry in life, which marked all the output of 1912 and 1913. Moreover, the first essay should never have been printed until Mr. Galsworthy had had another chance to study his Yankee at first hand. It is quite true that in response to the question, “How are you feeling?” some of us would reply, “Right smart, thank you”; but never, never, never does any Yankee say: “You’d better get off right smart,” or in any other way connect it with an active verb. We *feel* “right smart,” but we never *do* “right smart.” The only reparation for his mistaken Yankee is for Mr. Galsworthy to come and visit us, and few English writers would receive a more cordial reception.

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